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P-Tech and its made-to-order trainees

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When I went to university in New Zealand many years ago to study engineering, my government scholarship was supplemented by a small IBM scholarship and the expectation of a job with IBM after graduation. However, after graduation and a series of job interviews, IBM decided, in its wisdom, that despite my first-class honours degree I was not IBM material.

Perhaps if I had attended one of IBM's new Pathways in Technology Early College (P-Tech) high schools I would have been trained in behaviours and thinking patterns more suited to American corporate culture.



Prime Minister Tony Abbott, right, visited the Pathways in Technology Early College High School in Brooklyn, New York. ANDREW MEARES

After visiting a P-Tech school in New York, Tony Abbott declared it “an innovative and valuable education model for us to consider in Australia”. He thought it solved the problem of children wondering what job they would do when they left school and the problem of businesses not being able to find suitable employees. Not that graduates of these schools are promised a job with IBM when they leave, just a job interview.

The P-Tech school Tony Abbott visited is the first of a series of such schools planned for the coming years in New York and around the US with various industry partners. Five have already opened in Chicago.

The schools are publicly funded but industry partners advise on curriculum and mentor students. An extra two years after year 12 have been tacked on to the curriculum and graduates are awarded with an “associate degree”. These schools aim to prepare their students to be able to go straight into entry-level technology jobs when they graduate, such as call centres for PC users.

But should schools be training job-ready workers for employers? A major difference between training and education is that training is aimed at fitting a student for a specific end, whereas education is aimed at giving people choices in life.

Ideally education avoids behavioural objectives since it seeks to equip people to make their own decisions. Many educators have argued that such narrow and specific goals deprive future generations of other qualities that could otherwise be more fully developed, such as creative and critical faculties.

While there is inevitably some overlap between training and education, training is about giving a person the skills and knowledge to carry out a particular occupation or type of occupation; education is more about helping people to attain an understanding of the world they live in and their relationship with it. Education is supposed to foster independent learning and critical thinking which are often inimical to the needs of employers. It is highly improbable that children in the P-Tech schools are given the opportunity to critically analyse the role of work in society or even to know and exercise their rights as workers.

The propensity to question and show initiative, which a good education breeds, may be quite unsuitable for some jobs, particularly those at the bottom end of the occupational hierarchy.

The more that employers influence and shape education the more that it will tend towards worker training and away from citizen education.

Unfortunately for Tony Abbott’s PR progress through the US, he has just associated his policy thinking with a chain of failed attempts at vocational “education”. The P-Tech School Tony Abbott visited is housed in the building that the ironically named Paul Robeson High School for Business and Technology occupied before it was closed down because of poor student performance. Paul Robeson High School had partnerships with companies such as Citigroup and Merrill Lynch and offered students career pathways in finance, entrepreneurship and technology. It in turn replaced Alexander Hamilton Vocational High School after it failed in 1985.

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